

EXPOSING THE SUPPRESSED MATERNITY OF SAPPHO CLARK, A MIXED-RACE WOMAN IN PAULINE HOPKINS' *CONTENDING FORCES*

RIJUMONI GOGOI

Department of Science & Humanities, Rajiv Gandhi Government Polytechnic,

Vivek-Vihar, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Department of English & Foreign Languages, Tezpur University, Tezpur, Assam, India

ABSTRACT

Like the Mixed -Race men, the Mixed-Race women are generally supposed to be inferior to the pure bred of the races. Torn in between races, it is difficult for mixed race women, specifically mothers to overcome the dilemma resulting from racial anxiety, physical and mental abuse of being either a black or a white mother. The hybrid space that such mothers of literature represents in novels like Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Pauline E. Hopkins' *Contending forces* etc. disrupts the essentialist notion of identity by questioning the boundaries of race and ethnicity from within. The hybridity of the mothers of these novels refuses easy assimilation to the ethnic group identities society attributes to them. Mothers of mixed race origin cannot sometimes endure carrying the contradictory significations assigned to their bodies, because they always trapped by oppressive ideologies whenever they go. They face the impossibility of establishing their own subjectivities in an inter-racial society. Yet, in spite of their failure, we see their struggle for keeping their maternity intact. This paper presents how Sappho Clark, a mother figure in Pauline Hopkins *Contending Forces*, was bound to suppress her maternity in an inter-racial society and eventually was able to acknowledge her child overcoming the burden of being a mixed-race mother.

KEYWORDS: Mixed Race, Mulatto, Maternity, Splitting, Amalgamation

INTRODUCTION

Sappho Clark in Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1900) is the central maternal figure representing the inner conflicting forces more explicitly than the other two female characters, Grace Monfort and Mrs. Smith. The contending forces, as the title indicates, clearly present the broad cultural patterns and the uncompromising reality of racial oppression in Post Reconstruction America. The maternal figures depicted by the novelist are complicated by issues of race and gender. Through the character of Sappho Clark, the novelist shows how the mothers of mixed race identity are bound to suppress maternity in an inter-racial situation. Sappho Clark, being a mixed-race mother has to suffer a lot because of her inability to accept her child on emotional and psychological ground. This paper aims to study with the help of gender and psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, how in the process of unification with her child Alphonse, Sappho exhibits as well as challenges the traditional view points of motherhood and maternity, especially in an inter-racial society.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Critics like Marry Helen Washington and others accused Hopkins that in spite of her attempts to give women power and autonomy; she was influenced by what we called in Barbara Johnson Welter's term 'cult of true womanhood'. But we have to admit that in doing so, Hopkins shows her concern for the audience of that time. Hopkins advocates such

views like female self determination, equality in society, parenting from a distance etc. that seem common place for today's readers but were revolutionary at the turn of the century. So we have to analyze the quality of Sappho as a mother from the same stand point.

We are introduced to Sappho as a beautiful, mysterious, young woman "with a story written on her face" (89) who boards with the Smiths. The author carefully projects Sappho's suppressed maternity with brilliant word play while introducing her. Within the boarding house, Sappho keeps largely to herself. Her arrangement and overall designing of the room reflects that she is trying to hide something:

The iron bedstead and the washing utensils were completely hidden by drapery curtains of dark blue dents beautifully embroidered in white floss, a cover at the same material was thrown over the small table between the windows; plain white muslin draperies hid the unsightly but serviceable yellow shades of the windows. (98)

This hiding indicates the hiding of her past, her story associated with giving birth to Alphonse and above all her mixed race heritage.

Sappho attempts to hide from the Smith family her former identity, the story of Maubelle Beauben; who was sexually abused by her white uncle and ultimately left in a brothel in New Orleans. Rescued by a family friend, she was taken to a convent where it was initially believed that she died in childbirth. Actually Sappho did not die, it was Maubelle who died. The death of Maubelle Beauben and born of a new single woman Sappho Clark signifies some unconventional aspects of motherhood and maternity. Sappho's conscious denial of Alphonse on emotional and psychological level makes her a nontraditional mother unwilling to "walk in the shadow of a crime for which she is in no way to blame." (205). Again the story of Maubelle's supposed death also indicates that Maubelle was not thought to survive like most of the other black woman of the time. Sappho's erasure of Maubelle presents an obvious dilemma with regard to Alphonse, because the new born Sappho Clark is not his mother. Sappho's maternity is not even suggested until the midpoint of the novel, this deliberate rejection of Sappho's maternity at the beginning of the novel and acceptance of the same towards the ending had been explained by different critics in different ways. According to Gloria T Randle----

"The devastating assault that Maubelle's ego sustained through the multiple rapes she suffered and birth of her child brought about Maubelle's psychological death and Sappho Clark's birth." (Randle: 205)

But Sappho was always aware of her innocence and she was in dilemma whether to accept Alphonse or not. The factor behind Sappho's ultimate decision to acknowledge her maternity as suggested by Gloria T Randle is --

"M. Louis's home represents a safe haven for Sappho and demonstrate the healing power of a peaceful existence uncomplicated by psychic or physical threat. Three years in this secure environment reduce her anxiety and guilt and prepare her to bring Alphonse home." (Randle: 208)

Gloria Thomas Pillow explains this suppressed maternity of Sappho Clark with the help of psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, specifically by the phenomenon known as splitting (a process by which a deeply hated and despised part of the personality is spilt off). It is typically understood as an individual's privileging desired attributes and rejecting undesired ones. Klein's splitting theory describes precisely the transformation of Maubelle Beauben into Sappho Clark.

However I want to examine this double role play of Sappho and Maubelle Beauben in terms of racial anxiety of mixed- race mothers. The ideological complexities of mixed race mother, which is 'in between' races, will be the focus of

my argument. Gender theories and psychoanalytic theories are used in tandem to support my argument, which try to discuss how the system of racial oppression operates in multi racial American Society. In spite of carrying the burden of being a mixed race woman, Sappho has also to conceal the truth about her past. The fact that Sappho concealed her shameful past about Alphonse may be attributed to her inability to face the harsh racial system of antebellum America, where mixed- race people were assumed to be inferior to the purely bred of both races. As Walter Taylor has stated in *Faulkner's Search for the South*; "The racial mixing evoked 'fears that mixture could lower a superior race to the level of an inferior race or, worse that the weaker characteristics of each might combine to produce a degenerated people.'" (Taylor: 105)

Henry Hughes, an antebellum Southern sociologist who proposed the removal of all unenslaved Blacks from Mississippi, writes-"Impurity of races is in against the law of nature. Mulattoes are monsters. The law of nature is the law of God. The same law which forbids consanguineous amalgamation forbids ethnical amalgamation. Both are incestuous. Amalgamation is incest." (Nakachi: 27)

Hughes's argument also reflects the social anxiety of mixed-race people. Hopkins indicates the fate of mulatto race through the remarks made by Rev. John Thomas and narrated by Anna Stevens, "Suddenly he touched upon the Negro, and with impressive gesture and lowered voice thanked God that the mulatto race was dying out, because it was a mongrel mixture which combined the worst element of two races. To the poor mulatto! Despised by the blacks of his own race, scorned by the whites! Let him go out and hang himself!"(150)

In such a harsh situation, Sappho might not have wanted to disclose her maternity thinking about her son Alphonse's future because society was very critical about mixed race people. So, Sappho does not consider it suitable both for her and her son Alphonse to reveal her maternal love towards him. So, Sappho deliberately ignores her child from his first appearance at the church fair. He is introduced to us as "the pretty great nephew of the fortuneteller (Madam Frances or Aunt Sally) who dressed in costume, represented Mercury and carried messages to the fortunate ones remembered by the mystic power of futurity." (201)

Unlike Grace Montfort and her foster sister and slave Lucy, Sappho and Madam Frances share a bloodline. Sappho while using Aunt Sally as Alphonse's surrogate mother repeats the history of grace like a traditional Black mother. But deep in her heart, she feels concern for Alphonse. She advocates parenting from a distance. She always takes care of Alphonse's material welfare. This is indicated by Sappho's visit at Aunt Sally's house. "That money will do what you wish for the boy, Aunt Sally, and there is no need for him to know -----let him continue to think."(278-279)

Sappho's extraordinary emotional distance from her son is explicit in her reference to him as "the boy". Her willful refusal to communicate with Alphonse shows Sappho's fate as a mixed race woman, who is unable to confront her past because of the harsh social realities that consider mulattoes as monsters.

Sappho had a totally negative assumption about family's protective environment especially in such a hostile racial situation. Sappho's own family was not unable to protect her and eventually destroyed by societal forces. So she did not want to cover Alphonse with a protective maternal shield. But the complete homely environment of the Smiths provides Sappho an instructive counterpoint to her disinterest in family history as the novel describes how Mrs. Smith feels proud in describing her sketchy family background to her children .Indeed Sappho's growing comfort in the Smith family allows her to rebuild her history .She even plans to reveal to will of her child and to accept his marriage proposal. Though John

Largely tried to take advantage of Sappho's secret by revealing it, Sappho was not afraid of his momentary threat of exposure. As the novelist states "Sappho possessed a brilliant mind and resolute character----- She had strength of will enough for a dozen women, which if ever started on the wrong road, would be difficult to redirect into the paths of right."(341)

It is this strength of will that gives Sappho power to resolve her mind and to be united with her child. "At length she rose from that seat resolved that come what would she would claim the child and do her duty as his mother in love and training. She would devote her life to him. They would nevermore be separated. (345)

Sappho's love for Alphonse is revealed in chapter xx, entitled "Mother love". Sappho's maternity remains triumphant over her anxiety. Sappho blamed herself for not taking proper care of her child. "She gazed on her innocent face with mingled feelings of sorrow and regret as she thought of the lonely loveless life of the child. She had been so wicked to put him from her. It was her duty to guide and care for him. --- her shipwrecked life seemed about to find peace----- She gazed with new--- found ecstasy at the rosy face, the dimpled limbs, and thoughts that he was hers." Her feelings of degradation had made her ashamed of the joys of motherhood, at pride and possession in her child. But all that feelings were swept away----- the mother love chased out all the angushies that she had felt over his birth."(346).

Whatever may be the cause of Sappho's decision to accept Alphonse on emotional ground this evolution signifies her progression to the depressive position in Klenian terms. The Klenian depressive position is not synonymous with clinical depression, but rather a necessary process towards healing the spilt parts of the ego and achieving the ego integration. Only after coming into terms with Alphonse fully, Sappho was able to repair the damaged part of the ego.

Reuter, focusing on the tendency of the mixed race people in general comments that----"The desire of the mixed blood man is always and everywhere to be a white man; to be classed with and become a part of the superior race. The ideal---the center of gravity--- at the hybrid group is outside itself. The ideal of beauty, of success, of all that is good and desirable is typified by the superior race."(Reuter: 315).

But Sappho, as a mother of mixed race group challenges this notion of taking advantage of the superior class. Physically she resembles the classically beautiful tragic Mulatto who passes for white. "Tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long dark lashes--"(107)

Significantly, she has the prerogative of living a less subjugate life as a white woman because of her physical features. But she refused to pass as white. Late in the novel, when Sappho decided to declare her maternity publicly by acknowledging her child, she does pass as white under the pressure of circumstances. That too, is not out of the context as indicated by the following words of mother superior to Sappho;-

"My child", she said, -----"Are you still determined to pass as the boy's mother?"

"Yes mother, I am."

"Well then, you must be Madame Clark."

'No', replied Sappho hastily'

"No more deception" (351-352)

Mother superior's use of the verb "Pass" here holds dual implications. Because typically it is used to describe the act of masquerading on a racial level. Because of the mobility of mixed race characters, Sappho's prerogative of passing as white at first, and secondly it poses a question to what extent Sappho has actually internalized and embraced the fact of her maternity while "passing" as Alphonse's mother.

Though Alphonse is united with Sappho at last, we cannot ignore the fact that he had to suffer a lot due to lost childhood experience. Reborn in midlife lacking both a personal history and constant maternal care, it is bound that Alphonse's consequent development and adjustment will be a challenging one. It is evident in Alphonse's immature behavior.

"Have I said anything wrong, Mamma?" he asked anxiously.

"Not wrong my child, but mamma prefers that you never speak of the past to anyone"

"I will do just as you say, Mamma Sappho!" he cried, impetuously throwing his arms about her neck in a bearlike hug. (336)

Alphonse's poignant reference to her as 'Mamma Sappho' instead of "Mamma" implies distance rather than closeness.

CONCLUSIONS

Commenting on the supposed rules of mixed blood people in inter-racial situations, Edward Byron. Reuter in *The Mulatto in the United States* writes—

"They may be allowed to identify themselves with, and to become an integral part of, the culturally superior group or race. They may occupy a place apart, form an outcast group with a social status inferior to that of either of the parent races. They may be a connecting link between the whites and colored elements in the population. They may be used as a buffer between the extreme racial types in the community. They may identify themselves with and become the leaders of the lower race of the population. There may be various combinations of these roles and numerous transitional stages from one to another." (Reuter: 320)

Based on these classifications, Sappho falls into the last character type as her role is a complied one, a combination of many roles. She at first refused to pass as white but circumstances led her to change her decision. From another point of view, she is a connecting link between the white and the colored elements in the population as she connects the Smith family with the Montfort family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author is grateful to the Director, Higher & Technical Education, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh and Prof. F. Danta, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Tezpur University for providing assistance to carry out this research work.

REFERENCES

1. Reuter Byron Edward. 1977. *The Mulatto in the United States*. Boston USA: Gorham press.
2. Taylor, Walter. 1983. *Faulkner's search for the south*. Urbana: University of Illinois press.

3. Randle T. Gloria, Mates. 1999. *Marrige and motherhood; Feminist vision in Pauline Hopkins's contending Forces*. Tulsa studies in Women's literature, 18(2), 193-214
4. Pillow, Thomas Gloria (ed). 2010. *Mother love in Shades of Black*. Jefferson, North Colombia: Mc Farland & Company.
5. Hopkins E. Pauline. 1988. *Contending Forces*. New York: Oxford University press.
6. Nakachi Sachi. 2001. *Mixed race identity politics in Nella Larsen and Winifred eaton (Onoto watanna)*, Ohio University.